

Nomadic Sexualities and Nationalities:

Postcolonial Performative Words and Visual Texts

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In *Nomadism and Its Frontiers* (2001), El Mokhtar Ghambou makes paradoxical the literary, ethnographic and conceptual understandings of nomadism arguing against the “nomadic” semiotics which are inspired by Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s *Mille Plateaux* (1980) and which are also quite current within Maghrebian francophone literature and criticism. He writes:

With respect to its pervasive borrowings from anthropology and literature, nomadology is little more than a sophisticated expression that regenerates the myth of the myth of the nomad and makes it prosper under the unsubstantiated terms of transgression, subversion and mobility. The final paradox surrounding the nomadist discourse, which is not an exclusive property of the West, is the fact that North African francophone criticism and fiction are increasingly attracted by the very frontiers that furnish European and North American nomadists with their figures and tropes...With respect to its pervasive borrowings from anthropology and literature, nomadology is little more than a sophisticated expression that regenerates the myth of the myth of the nomad and makes it prosper under the unsubstantiated terms of transgression, subversion and mobility (pp. 27-28).

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Analyzing the various transgressions of identity within Western and Maghrebian literature and ethnography, Gambou's work signals the occasion to reconsider the nexus where symbolic and real nomadisms meet and where the fantasy of the nomad remains fully intact within Western discourse while the reality of displaced peoples remains quite romanticized in western discourse and literature. Ghambou's very cogent study of nomadology as both a theoretical moment and a cultural construction within the west, conterminously underlines that nomadology has replaced the primitivist myths of the noble savage in a neocolonial setting where non-western bodies uproot themselves and make room for the artifices of western expansionism under the guise of the "nomad fantasy". The danger in such a fantastical understanding of nomadism, of course, is the elision the very real issues of exile, diaspora, and nationalism currently facing groups such as the North African Tuaregs and Middle Eastern bedouins. Such romanticization of displacement also tends to accept uncritically the notion that many third world nationals as part of a larger nomadism in which Algerians leave their country for economic enrichment in France and where Palestinians aimlessly wander about the world while awaiting the consolidation of their homeland.

Yet, nomadism is often represented in non-western literature and cinema as a moment in which the subject is simultaneously imperiled by exile, diaspora and transnationalism, while also this very same subject uses the conditions of exile to recreate new spaces and languages through which many facets of her identity are differently structured, understood and represented. Indeed, there is much need to consider the very real traversals of the earth, the many substantiated diasporas, which have forced millions of people to leave their homes and their countries due to political and economic motivates, such as Maghrebian migration to France and Lebanese migration to England, for instance. Likewise, there is a demand to recognize that these subjects of exile and diaspora are themselves agents in the creation of newer visions of the nation-state, of transient identities, and of subversive acts, *because* their exiles have often contributed to the ways in which they think about nation, race, and

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gender, among many other references. Here, I attempt to bring these two interpretations of the political and the poetic together under a single reading which incorporates nomadism as a series of discontinuous spaces and moments in which identity is neither essentialized nor romanticized as a Western escape from the fixity of the everyday urban scene, and where the political realities of nomadism do not solely drive the dialectics of oppressor/oppressed through which the nomadic subject has no choice but to accept the chains of oppression that exile has left her. Indeed, she does speak back and it is through her body and her language that she (re)creates the stage for re-articulating herself.

In *Maghreb pluriel* (1983), Khatibi advances the notion of the *bi-langue* as a domain in which western and non-western discourses interact, review and recast the traditionally dichotomized notions of gender, sexuality, language and culture without reformulating a new, stagnant identity. For Khatibi, the *bi-langue* evidences the process of decolonization of the Maghreb through a perpetual analysis and consideration of both western and non-western texts. The *bi-langue* presupposes the fluid space of destruction, reflection, and recreation in which writers and critics of both the “East” and the “West” must interact and participate critically. Khatibi sets out to subvert the hegemonic practices of linguistic and cultural domination by advocating “langage poétique” as a force through which one can welcome the foreign, or the other, which, according to Khatibi, exists in every language, nation, culture, and every subjectivity. As such, his reading of Maghrebian texts gives rise to the possibility of re-examining the epistemological constraints that western theory has commonly manifested in examining non-western practices and literatures while still accounting for the many contributions that have, to a large degree, enlightened his analyses. Yet, Khatibi’s construction of polymorphous sexualities, genders, and bodies is interpreted by other theorists, such as Winifred Woodhull, as a masking of individual faces, of individual experiences, and even the specificity of women’s bodies and experiences. However, to read Khatibi’s work as an attempt to name women’s experience as singular, rather than as an effort to forge a poetics of “*pensée-autre*” through which post-colonial identities are or *might be* formed,

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elides the very core of Khatibi's argument. The fluidity of the somatic for Khatibi does not manifest a totalizing obfuscation of identity as Woodhull argues, but instead offers what he calls "intractable difference" as an option for uprooting western hegemony wherein the post-colonial subject might reconstruct herself.

Unlike Lyotard's definition of "intractable difference", Khatibi's *bi-langue* is not a space which pervades all representation as homogeneous. Instead, the *bi-langue* is a sphere which enables expression and movement, destruction and construction, and where conflicting possibilities might meet, revealing new struggles, and manifesting new possibilities for discussing identity that are not encoded as universal or obligatory. Creating language as the body and the body as language, Khatibi weaves the somatic body and the linguistic as interdependent expressions of identity. Moreso, he constitutes the somatic as the social body through which the individual body connotes the community and the community implicates the individual, much like in Islamic theology where the *ʿumma* which is the body, the community of Muslims throughout the world which embraces both the singularity of the individual and the collectivity of the masses. Yet, *ʿumma* is derived from the Arabic word *umm*, the word for "mother" which makes even more paradigmatic the identity of the individual as both free of the feminine and yet inevitably linked to it. As Khatibi discusses *ʿumma*, he underlines the importance of understanding community as inclusive of all including the "division in division":

The name "Arab" designs a war of nominations and of ideologies that bring to light the active plurality of the arab world. Plurality and diversity, upon which we will return—inasmuch as the subversive element of other-thought [*pensée-autre*]. Because the unity of the arab world is something of the past if we consider the "Oumma" from a theocratic point of view, the ideal and matrixial community. Therefore, this unity is, for us, of the past, to analyze in its persistent imaginary. And moreover, this alleged unity, much celebrated, embraces not only its specific margins (Berber, Copt, Kurd...and margin of margins: the feminine), but it also covers the division of the Arab world in countries, peoples, sects, classes; and

from division to division, until the suffering of the individual, deserted by the hope of his God, to all never invisible (1983, p. 13).

The *ʿumma*, for Khatibi, is comparable to the *bi-langue* as it is the conterminous breaking and melding of cultures, languages, genders and bodies. This metaphor is not uncommon as writers such as Abdelfattah Kilito (Morocco) have also discussed the somatic body in terms of that which pertains to the social body—as that which blurs the edges of identity in which all members of the *ʿumma* (habitat) are both indistinguishable and yet individual. Creating a poetics of language and the body, the *bi-langue* maintains identity not as a dialectical struggle, but as difference, while maintaining the social body as mutually implicated by the somatic body. As such, the body of exile is a physical space effected by economic, political and cultural realities as much as it is a creative terrain for creating anew identity.

As Khatibi relies on a *mélange* of traditional and western readings of the body and language, he also refers to these discursive vectors in his analysis of language as *plural*. As language and writing are caught up in the impossibility of singular interpretation in Khatibi's theory of Maghrebian identity, so too is language or identity impossible to interpret singularly, as with Islamic theology. In the Maghreb language clearly marks identity—education, geography, ethnicity, heritage. Speaking Arabic to a shopkeeper in Rabat's Agdal will often result in one being answered in French, though in this same city's *medina qdima* (the old city), *derija* (Moroccan dialectical Arabic) would necessarily be the only language of communication. Language is transformed by surrounding urban spaces as much as it inflects urban change. In this way, Khatibi's notion of the *bi-langue* constitutes a tradition in which there is neither an "incorrect" nor a "correct" identity (or space of enunciating identity). Instead, Khatibi studies the interstices of language and meaning thus manifesting the plurality of Maghrebian identities which can only be understood in terms of the larger social body and the individual performatives of meaning which often conflict with one another. Without the *ʿumma* as a means of contextualizing this linguistic and somatic plurality, all signification is lost, just as the *ʿumma* depends upon the individual

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utterances and bodies. This interdependence between singular and plural enunciations mirrors the process of textual, oral and performative interpretations according to Islamic law and language which ultimately serves as the basis for subverting singular constructions of Moroccan identity.

We can see much of Khatibi's critique of writing identity most clearly in his *L'art calligraphique arabe* (1994) wherein he raises several questions regarding the origin of meaning, specifically referring to the language of the *Qur'an*, Arabic, and its much later "perfection" of diacritical signs which were established long after the death of the Prophet Muhammed, during the reign of the Third Caliph, Uthman (23/644-35/655). Khatibi queries: "How can a miraculous language be transcribed without giving the lie to its implicit perfection?" (p. 18). We should remember that the meaning of Islam is taken from three basic sources: the *Qur'ān*, the literal words of Allah that the angel Gabriel revealed to Mohammed; the *ḥadīth*, the words and deeds of the Prophet as told through a *isnad* (chain); and the *Sunna*, the actions of the Prophet. Khatibi's study of calligraphic art initially ironizes the perfection of the *Qur'an* (which was not finalized until almost thirty years after its revelation), while it also evidences the beauty of its written form throughout the following centuries, acts which often created and added to the text's original meaning. In his study on calligraphic art, Khatibi essays to understand the various understandings of *Qur'anic* language—from those interpretations which remain steadfastly bound to notions of fixity, place and original language, to others like Mu'ammer who claim that the *Qur'an* always maintains a sense of place regardless of where it is read:

"The *Qur'an* need not be transferred, or moved, or actually destroyed, yet it exists in a place even as it is written, or read, or preserved. If it is obliterated in one place, it will not for all that be destroyed there. If it is transcribed in one place, it shall not for all that be transferred from another place; likewise, even if it is memorized, read or heard, it may be destroyed" (p. 29).

Khatibi's study of calligraphy (from the ninth century through the advent of printing) is ultimately an interrogation of the fixity of meaning through time,

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translation and translocation, through the present day. As much as Khatibi's study could be read as a traditional contemplation of the language of the Qur'an, it could as easily be understood as a text which dislocates the sacred by bringing together the double spaces of identity whereby the sacred and the human intersect as well as where the language of origin (belonging) and exile (outside) come together.

Khatibi stresses that calligraphy, like all writing, is always double: "Avec d'autres nous pensons que l'écriture (calligraphique ou non) est *double*, toujours double dans ses instances. Il serait vain d'en marquer la violence irrécupérable. L'écriture se scinde dans le texte à jamais". Throughout his study of calligraphy, Khatibi demonstrates the text as embodied and yet displaced, as having a definite meaning, while constantly being in search for one. For instance, here the letter "kh" above, written in Shikesté script (16) all share the same point of the letter "kh" while each figure (body) has a separate script, yet the text below in Ta'liq script is clearly divided between that which occupies the center and that in the margin which encroaches upon the "purity" of the page. Khatibi endeavors to demonstrate that calligraphy is an art form of writing which constantly subverts materiality and space—writing is necessarily inside and outside, at home and in exile from all meaning. As such, there is necessarily an overlapping in meaning as in the writing of the letter "kh" or a division from one central text to its marginal inscriptions. Each textual marking calls into question which is center or margin, which is the integral part of the letter and which denotes meaning as was typical of the Moroccan al-Qandūsi who used the margins as text, completely displacing "place" (25). Likewise here, we see an Archaic *kufic* script (22) whereby the vowels are marked by red dots above, below and inside the letters, a practice common during the reign of the Caliph Abdelmalek (685/705). Here, the letters are distinguished by color and the space between the black of the body of each letter and the red dots which give finality, precision, to each letter. Meaning emerges between the marriage of the smaller red markings and the more evident calligraphic bodies interdependent upon each other for meaning. And in later calligraphic works such as this 19th century Moroccan manuscript by al-Thalabi

Abu Ishaq Ahmed (23), we are even given a yellow outline of each letter to improve legibility whereby the script is virtually removed of the background and brought off the page to the reader/speaker. And here (24), we see a common occurrence in Islamic calligraphy whereby the figurative of letters appears such as this Maghribi script reading “The beloved” (*Habibu*) whereby the word is also a face, language is embodied as human form and yet the word signifies just this. And in another work by al-Qandūsi (27) the name of Allah is surrounded by litanies and quotations. Here, the grandeur of the word “Allah” seems much more a graphic than a word compared to the accompanying, smaller text. The juxtaposition of the smaller writing with the larger script of “Allah” would seem to position one type of text as figurative while the other text retains a sense of being written, of being “pure” language. Yet each texts is ultimately both figurative and linguistic—one embodying a much larger and corporeal type of writings and the other a scrawl which, from a distance, could easily be viewed as miniature detail in a relief drawing around a larger text.

Yet Khatibi goes beyond analyzing pure calligraphy in his study as he examines the work of a contemporary painter, Mehdi Qotbi, whose paintings of calligraphy articulate his plural experiences of identity as a Moroccan living most of his life in Paris (31). Through Qotbi’s use of Arabic and Roman letters, Khatibi interprets this artist’s work as a struggle between image and language as his paintings seek to embrace the duality of his identity while manifesting a struggle for a single language with which to express such identity. Khatibi reads Qotbi’s work as an “encounter between two civilizations” whereby meaning of the sign (Arabic) and the image (Western) are in perpetual dialogue and relocation. In this way, writing, for Khatibi, subverts time, space and form as he states:

As sovereign writing, calligraphy denounces, subverts, reverses the same substance of language in transporting it to another space, a scheming other, who submits language to a overdetermined variation. It is this vacillating movement between phonie and language and graphics that we are interrogating here. Like Chinese, Arab calligraphy is a unheard writing of the sign and the rhetoric of an over-signification. Rhetoric? This word is habitually reserved for the literary act.

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But it is there that the unknown derives; the occidental knowledge originates, fixing the senses on the closure of the word, which would have the double virtue of being the reservoir of sense and of being in front of the graphic. This is therefore hidden, distanced in a secondary function, a function of transvestitism (p. 177).

It is through Khatibi's study of Maghrebian cultural plurality and Islamic writing that he ultimately creates the space for re-articulating Moroccan identity as a moment which has no single essence and thus cannot be homogeneously represented either at "home" or abroad. Indeed, Qotbi's work, like much of Khatibi's writings, indicate that representation through writing is a process of creating identity anew.

Khatibi's *La blessure du nom propre* (1974) further deconstructs Moroccan national identity through writing, the body and writing on the body. Through writing, the ambiguous act of coding (and miscoding), Khatibi constructs both the body and language as plural and where each inflect the other—writing becomes corporeal and the body becomes part of writing. Analyzing *tatouage* in the Maghreb, Khatibi maintains the corporal space of language and the linguistic spaces of the body as central to understanding the plurality of identities, bodies, and sexualities. In *La blessure du nom propre*, Khatibi states (11):

To engender a body demands, in our case, a certain divine choice; the tattooed Muslim body obeys particular rules of deployment and spacing; in Morocco, we tattoo mostly one single site, the front of the body (6), while for Polynesians, tattoo is generalized. At this point we add another: woman can tattoo the front of her body and man can only tattoo his hand, his arm and the front of his arm. This is to say that the hand cannot leave the field of writing. (3) One can equally tattoo as one writes, that is to say in privileging the right side, that which does not destroy the symmetry; the body is barred by a motif which is parallel to it and which passes across the forehead, chin and between the breasts (6) (p. 80).

Khatibi's notion of *tatouage* creates the body as a textual sphere, a terrain upon which signs (language) are directly imprinted upon the body and where the body

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performs—quite literally—language. (7) The body of *tatouage* is a body which is at once singular and plural, individual and collective—for it forms part of a larger group in which the sign marks its belonging or reclusion. The body is a parchment upon which the collective unconscious is scripted and through which the body exercises a simultaneous conformism and heterodoxy, depending on the geographical positioning of this body and the type of *tatouage* implemented. Once again, like language, the *tatouage* of the body can be a permanent rendering upon the body, or in the case of henna, a temporal marker where meaning is necessarily undone through time.

According to Khatibi, (1) writing and the body are inextricably linked moments of the same phrase, for both are temporal performances within the continuum of space and time. Yet *tatouage* also qualifies the body within an economy of theatre, a space of performance, in which the somatic is marked by nature, blood, desire and the social. Where the erotic is ritualized, *tatouage* is the story of such ritual:

Tattoo permits this erotic duel between symmetry and asymmetry, this live economy of an enamored expenditure and of a doubled [*dédoublé*] desire, theatralized. The tattooed body is a graphic that disfigures the notion of appropriation, it is a writing that demands to be read, loved, desired in its most stirring, confused movement. On two occasions, the young Moroccan (still faithful to her popular culture) can become tattooed: at the moment of puberty and of marriage (1974, p. 97).

Khatibi argues that cultural inscriptions upon the body are part of a *dédoublement* whereby ritual and fiction are interwoven and where language and the body are both symmetrical and asymmetrical, both real and performative. While Khatibi's notions of writing and corporeality are certainly not new to the Maghreb, it is important to note that Khatibi maintains that the *dédoublement* of identity depends upon, not the dissolution of binaries, but constant coexistence of binaries through the shared spaces in which these plural identities negotiate the somatic and language, just as they negotiate sexuality and nation.

For instance, *tatouage* of the face serves, (4) in part, to guard against the evil eye; yet Khatibi reminds us that since the “third eye” (*Toe*) is exchanged for the missing “third eye”, somatic and linguistic signs are necessarily interdependent in their abundance and/or lack, though these signs are never entirely compatible. Likewise, in the Maghreb it is not uncommon in rural areas for people to hold up their hand while saying “*khamisa ‘la ‘aynik*” (five in your eyes) to ward off the evil eye. But when a similar warding off is uttered such as “*zob ‘la ‘aynik*” (the penis in your eye) in guarding against the evil eye, one begins to see how the *dédoublement* of language and the body spirals into multiple references and fictions in which meaning becomes entangled amidst the panoply of signifiers and references. (5) In sufism, however, the eye is central to being since it is understood as the essence of the spirit that necessarily cannot separate itself from its meaning, nor from its contexts. In Sufism, one cannot conceive of identity without embracing the essence (*‘ayn*). Hence this eye reflects both physicality and spirituality as the physical refers to the spiritual, and the spiritual necessarily is already linguistically inscribed within the physical by virtue of its name *‘ayn*. Likewise, in his autobiography, *La mémoire tatouée*, Khatibi links remembering, writing, exile, sexuality and national identity to the process of *tatouage*, where memory is a space of self creation and meaning, just as writing is the process of marking oneself. Inscribing identity for Khatibi, therefore, is a constant negotiation of bringing language and the body together where each performs the other, each marks the other with meaning, and each meaning exiles the former. In this way, Khatibi’s work on writing the body and *writing on the body* reciprocally displaces the monolithic constructions of nationality and sexuality in Morocco, and identity necessarily becomes something which moves, traversing the inscribed body of *tatouage* while inhabiting a nomadic corpus that defies naming *from the outside in*. Just as koufîc calligraphy composed of black lines and red dots engenders meaning whereby each letter takes on a separate interpretation (or misinterpretation) depending on how the dots are incorporated or elided, Khatibi’s notion of the bi-langue is a deconstruction of facile interpretations of national and sexual identities through the inextricable nexus of text and body as nomadic spaces of

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translocation, movement, instability and conflict for the postcolonial subject in Morocco and abroad.

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